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FEB 9 1996

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World at your fingertips: Internet expo debuts

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HEARST NEWSPAPERS

WASHINGTON — Now, for the first time, people around the globe can attend a world's fair — without leaving home.

They can view samples of food sold at the Aw Taw Kah, the huge outdoor market in Bangkok, Thailand; witness India's Durga Pucha, a religious festival in Calcutta; visit the Tokyo Aquarium; or perhaps listen to Tibet's Dalai Lama.

The secret? The Internet 1996 World Exposition, which had its grand opening Thursday.

A lavish fete rings in the historic day. In a program known as "24 Hours in Cyberspace," a team of 50 reporters and photographers documented events worldwide Thursday. The material was posted, via mission control in San Francisco, on the Internet.

To see the dispatches, or any of the expo's hundreds of other features, computer users need to dial into the Internet with this address: <http://park.org>.

The organizers have added super computers and super-fast fiber optic connections, based in several countries, that have tripled the Internet's global capacity.

This hasn't come cheap, but it's free for the public. Dozens of high-tech companies — mostly in the United States and Japan — donated \$100 million in goods and services to build the expo.

Among the U.S. contributors are Bay Networks, IBM, MCI, MFS Communications, NBC, Quantum Corporation, SSDS, Sun Microsystems and UUNET Communication Services.

"The immediate pay back for them is PR," said Carl Malamud, the expo's creator and secretary general. In the long term, he added, they'll likely gain millions of new Internet users.

Since the expo first tested the waters on Jan. 1, at least 10,000 people have logged on every day. So far, the users represent more than 50 countries.

A hit in Asia

The fair is especially popular in Asia. China, India, Indonesia, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and Thailand each have participated by opening their own cyber pavilions.

But Japan, where Internet usage is starting to explode, has shown the most interest — for

ed Japan's direct access to the Internet. For the first time, Japanese users can communicate with Koreans and others, without going through a U.S. circuit.

What makes this possible is the expo's shining accomplishment: the Internet Railroad, a new \$50 million backbone for the global computer network.

The railroad is a fiber-optic line, circling nearly the entire globe, that shuttles information at lightning speed — 45 million bits (about 30 floppy disks) per second — from country to country.

"The Internet Railroad will be known as the Eiffel Tower of this world's fair — a permanent legacy that people around the world can enjoy," says Vinton Cerf, an original designer of Internet protocols and a senior vice president at MCI Telecommunications, which donated most of the "tracks."

The other key element of the expo is Central Park, a network of new super computers that contains more than a terabyte of disk space — the equivalent of 1 million floppy disks. Quantum Corporation, of Milpitas, Calif., was the primary contributor.

Yet for all its big-bucks hardware, the expo does not qualify as an official world's fair. To do so, it would need to be certified by the Bureau of International Expositions.

"The first question they ask is where is your fair?" says Malamud. Cyberspace doesn't exactly qualify. The next official world's fair will be Expo 2000 in Hanover, Germany.

The Internet expo, though, is

not entirely virtual. It links itself to physical events. It will broadcast the Kennedy Center's 25th anniversary celebrations in April, Peter Gabriel's concert tour this summer, the Lincoln Center's interactive "Brain Opera" in July and the U.S. presidential debates in October.

Time is right

Malamud, the 36-year-old driving force behind the expo, said he became convinced the time is right for an Internet world's fair. He says the network, despite its increasingly wide usage in the United States, is still quite new in most parts of the world.

Historically, he said, global expos have served as the venue for promoting new technology.

"Electricity, the telephone, ice cream cones, postcards — even hamburgers — were all introduced at world's fairs," says Malamud, who heads the not-for-profit Internet Multicasting Service.

To make his vision a reality, Malamud has circled the globe, soliciting support from engineers, businessmen and officials. President Clinton and Russian President Boris Yeltsin have both sent endorsements.

Malamud said he wants to get people excited about the network. He also wants to spur engineers to build better hardware and encourage greater funding for its infrastructure.

His own enthusiasm for the Internet began by accident. An economist by training who holds an MBA from Indiana University, he never took a class in comput-

ers. But he got so frustrated with the software available for economic modeling that he began tinkering.

Malamud, a workaholic who talks rapid fire, wrote *Exploring the Internet: A Technical Travelogue* in 1992, a book about the then-little known elite that built the network.

The next year, he began producing — via the Internet — weekly interviews with computer experts. The program, known as "Geek of the Week," was a hit.

Malamud's latest venture, the Internet 1996 World Exposition, is his most ambitious yet. But ironically, he cannot attend it without going to his office. At home, he has only books and music — no computer.

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